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ABSTRACT

A program at the State University of New York in Brockport has provided leisure time skill instruction to 45 retarded adults living in the community. As state funding of transportation services terminated, community groups expressed their increased awareness of problems facing the handicapped by agreeing to assume costs. (CL)

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THE RETARDED ADULT IN THE COMMUNITY -- AN ACTION PROGRAM

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The past decade has seen dramatic shifts in attitudes toward the mentally retarded. Militant parents and advocates have lobbied for radical changes in educational programs in both institutional and community settings. The concept of normalization, developed first in the Scandanavian countries, has been widely accepted. To return institutionalized retarded persons to the community has been cited as one of the nation's major goals (Nixon, 1971).

Nirje (1969) defined normalization as " . . . making available to the mentally retarded, patterns and conditions of everyday life which are as close to the norms and patterns of the mainstream of society . . ." and noted that this " . . . implies a normal routine of life . . . (including) . . . leisure time activities in a variety of places (pp. 182-183)."

One of the major problems of the repatriated retarded adult is not his retardation, but the fact that he does not have the experience of living and coping in the normal community. He is not aware of adult leisure time opportunities available to him and does not have the social skills that would make him feel comfortable in such community settings. Nirje (1969) continued his discussion on normalization by noting that if the retarded adult was given the training and experience that would enable him to use normal leisure time facilities of his society on his own, he would ". . . also learn to cope with unprepared, unstructured situations without panicking (pg. 183)." It has become increasingly evident that there is a

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continuing need to assist mentally retarded adults in developing skills and confidence in usign public recreation and leisure time facilities on their own or in small independent groups (Luckey & Shapire, 1974; Pomeroy, 1974; Witt, 1971; Sengstock & Stein, 1967).

In an effort to provide the retarded adult with recreational outlets, some agencies and institutions have designated particular times when other activities will cease and special programs will be provided for him. These special programs only serve to increase the isolation and fail to provide casual interaction with the normal population. Placement of handicapped adults in programs designed for and attended by children and teenagers has been another attempt to provide programming. This is a denial of human dignity and fails to provide the retarded adult with social models from whom he will learn independent behavior. Finding an educational institution willing to accept the responsibility of providing programs for mentally retarded citizens has been difficult. Rusalem (1974) recently noted: "Commonly, the school door closes behind the departing exceptional individual at the end of twelfth grade or even earlier, and the school's interest in him comes to a grinding halt (pg. 61)." Stanfield (1973) wrote that " . . . graduation from school marked the beginning of a life of relative isolation . . . and segregation from the community at large (pg. 56)."

HISTORY OF AN EVOLVING PROGRAM

Monroe County, New York, is rich in post-secondary educational services financed by public funds. These include a four-year college that is part of the State University of New York, a two-year community college, and numerous adult education programs offered by individual school districts. The services and efforts of these institutions are directed to meeting the unique needs of most individuals and to offering adults of Monroe County an

opportunity to improve skills, broaden career potential, and generally enhance their lives through a wide choice of undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education programs. Although there has been no conscious attempt to exclude mentally retarded citizens from the facilities or programs, most credit or non-credit courses offered by these educational institutions neither attracted the retarded adult nor were designed to meet their specific needs.

In 1948, the new State University of New York (SUNY) adopted as its motto "Let Each Become All He Is Capable of Being." Conscious of the needs of all citizens, and in an effort to meet the commitment stated in that motto, the Office of Continuing Education at SUNY Brockport, located in western Monroe County, offered a non-credit course specifically designed by two faculty members to train retarded adults in the use of public leisure time facilities and to introduce and/or improve the skills needed to use those facilities. While there are few commercial enterprises other than bowling or miniature golf available in the geographic area, SUNY Brockport, with its outstanding recreational facilities, has become the center for community recreation activity. The course description was included in the regular Continuing Education brochure and was scheduled to meet at an evening hour when all college and community activities were in operation.

All of the twelve retarded adults whoappeared for the first registration in February, 1974 had been personally recruited by the college instructors who had designed the course. An equal number of physical education students, both graduate and undergraduate, were recruited to evaluate motor skills of the registrants and provide whatever instruction was needed in three areas: swimming, bowling, and volleyball. An open enrollment policy was maintained and during the course of the term, three more retarded adults were registered.

PROBLEM

In 1973, the National Association for Retarded Citizens had noted that three major problems seemed to plague the expansion of recreational services for the retarded: transportation, finances, and program planning. A year later, Pomeroy (1974) also found similar problems of transportation hindering the initiation and expansion of programs.

Because of the excellent facilities available to the program and the eagerness of numbers of student volunteers, program planning was not a major problem. As the number of retarded adults participating in the program grew, more facilities in the college recreation complex were opened to them. Ice skating on a new indoor rink, golf, canoeing, basketball, paddle ball, gymnastics, weightlifting, judo, and dance therapy were added to the original program of swimming, bowling, and volleyball. The retarded adults were allowed a free choice of activities subject to some persuasion on the part of the college students to try a new activity. Open recreation activities and sports events, available to the community at large, were also available to those who wished to participate.

It soon became evident that the lack of public transportation did keep a number of retarded adults from participating in a post-secondary program specifically designed to meet their unique needs. Finances, too, became a problem when it was evident that at least four coordinators were needed to facilitate movement from one activity to another. The college instructors approached many agencies and finally succeeded in having a one-time mini-proposal funded by the New York State Education Department. The grant money was awarded primarily to assess the transportation needs of the group. Registration rose to twenty-five when transportation became available.

When the mini-grant funding ran out, there were forty-five adults

enrolled in the course ranging in age from eighteen to fifty-five. Half of that number had been repatriated by the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene to a nearby group home. Although many had adjusted to community living and had been placed in apartments, they continued to enroll in the course each term. Their transportation was arranged by the Department of Mental Hygiene. The second group lived at home and came from nearby suburban and rural communities where no public transportation was available. Their transportation was dependent on the good will of parents, neighbors, and friends.

During the year the mini-grant was funded, money was available to provide private transportation for all the retarded adults who lived at home. As that funding terminated, it became evident that other sources of money must be located that would provide transportation and support the salaries of four student coordinators.

A SOLUTION

Armed with a short color film prepared by the Educational Communications Department of the College and a series of slides depicting the recreational activities in which the retarded adults involved, the college instructors turned tc the community for funding of the program. The recreation commission in each nearby town was approached and two commissions agreed to furnish a vehicle if funds were available to pay the drivers. Three men's service clubs, Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lions, were approached, as well as the local women's clubs, volunteer fire companies, and local industry. Each organization was asked to contribute a sum that could be duplicated each year in their budget. Their response was immediate and heart-warming. Funds were provided for transportation as well as for modest salaries for four student coordinators.

A major positive side effect of the request for funding was the local recognition of the course by the community. Many townspeople had no idea of

the problems constantly faced by parents who kept their retarded children at home over the years, problems that increased with parents' efforts to provide normal adult experiences and activities for those children who had now grown to be men and women.

SUMMARY

As facilities and programs expand for the majority of tax-paying citizens interested in furthering their education or enhancing their lives with new skills and interests, a subtle form of discrimination exists that forces post-secondary programs into a pattern that will fit only the intellectually able. Imaginative planning and community action is needed if the retarded adults are to be allowed to continue their education and make use of local recreation and leisure time facilities. As the movement toward normalization continues to gain momentum, programs must be established that will serve as prototypes. When the problem of financing a program for retarded adults is taken to the community, greater awareness of the problems faced by retarded adults is created. The State University College at Brockport, New York, and the surrounding communities in Monroe County provide an organizational model that offers retarded adults opportunities to explore their personal abilities, to assist them in developing self-regard and independence, and to allow them the opportunity to join the mainstream of society.

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